

One morning in my country we will leave our homes  
On that morning we will be unmasked and in safe air.  
That first day, those first days  
We will rush.  
I think we will rush  
We will hug even strangers  
We will hold hands  
We will stand body to body  
Breath to breath  
With whoever we have left.  
We understand the lives of others best by touching them.  
The lack of this has made a hollow space in us.  
We know it, wake with it.  
Being born alone, we are condemned  
To reach out always over distance to each other  
We fail to understand our separated secrets  
We fill the absences of other reaching people with bad guesses  
And metastasising doubts  
Stand enough away, live far enough and then  
We cannot know you  
Stand just at the edge of our long evening shadows  
And our compassion for you thins and drifts.  
In this we are like other people  
Not so very bad, but careless.

But on that day, the first when our confinements break,  
If an all at once day could ever happen,  
We would remember all our dead  
Our silent and domestic casualties  
We would still look for them  
Because in so much happiness they should return  
To make it whole  
In our dreams they were only shut away like us  
And now their doors should open too.  
We do love those we love.  
And we will not forget them  
And how they were worlds  
And magnitudes and wonders  
Their ornaments and silliness and kisses

Their eating meals and fears and promises  
Their doing all the things the living do  
As if they will never have to fall.  
Some of us have photographs. We look  
At faces smiling into futures they don't have.  
We know the manner of their dying.  
We will not forget.  
In this we will be like quite normal people  
Like people anywhere, like you.

We are like you.  
We are little human people  
Smaller than accidents and illnesses and death  
Smaller than governments and hatreds.  
We like breathing  
We cry at kindnesses  
We need regular laughter  
We are pleased by watching dawns and sunsets  
We are comforted by musics  
We grow strong when we can feed on beauty  
We need shelter, water, food  
Like other humans.  
We are like you.

But our country is not like your country  
Not any more  
Years ago  
Gentle and slow and creeping years ago  
We decided to do without beauty.  
Small people in the usual way  
We agreed to be smaller  
Not all at once  
Just this gentle and slow creeping  
We agreed that paintings were superfluous  
And sculptures were unnatural and costly  
And music. Did we need so much music?  
And those actors up on stages  
Who could pace about and gesture and speak with flawless grace  
Who could show us better selves and let us lean against them  
Let us feel the stretch of standing unafraid.  
Did we need them?  
Should we trust them?  
Did we need anything, really?  
Superfluous people, bound to fall.

Strange minds made stranger choices  
They picked the loudest of the broken and unwell  
And we agreed to love them.  
We set them on various stages  
In front of various lenses  
And stared at them while they reached down and blessed  
The tired constriction of our souls  
They addicted us to contempt.

And we don't need dancers  
Not when we can slip in drunken gutters  
And watch when others do the same  
And hate all those involved.  
Clumsiness is best and only threat can fascinate  
Can grip the audience  
When skills are set aside.  
Then first the fear and next the rage  
Are all the warmth we ever get.

And we don't need words.  
Don't burn the books  
Ignore them  
And the writers  
Shut their mouths  
Close the libraries.  
Hide the learning  
Idolise our lack of clarity.  
In the absence of fiction  
We have lies and pending injuries  
Poorly expressed.

Having always believed we were a fine people  
Born in a nation of natural resilience  
We were surprised by our descent.  
This was supposed to only happen in other places  
Where the residents deserved it.

And now there was nothing to interest us  
But extremities.  
All those kind reminders of our nature  
Washed away.  
We distrusted our neighbours  
Because they probably were monsters.  
Distrusted our families

Our authorities  
And began to be ghosts in our own lives  
The art that let us reach the truth and mystery of others  
Ran away.  
We let it go.  
We were encouraged to abandon it.  
Some of us kept small treasures  
Knew old crafts  
But how to practice them defeated us.  
We were starved of light.

Our separated secrets festered.  
Our species is unimpressive in the dark.  
The absences in reality were no longer filled  
With arias and sonnets.  
The truths that defend us were no longer repeated.  
Jokes with no hate in their teeth  
The practical love that makes beauty for strangers  
Because perhaps they might be worth it,  
Beauty for others that uncovers other beauties,  
That was an indulgence, decadence. Contagion.  
Our guesses and doubts were engineered  
Into screaming.

We are small things prone to loneliness  
We have so little left to keep us from it.  
Our headlines punch us every morning  
And our pain makes us selfish.  
Our compassion has withered, even for ourselves.  
We stopped being worth art  
We believed we couldn't stand what it might show us  
This is not a new story  
Only new to us.  
We are just like other people.  
Easily misled.

And on that one first beautiful  
New morning when we run outside  
We will be in a lawless country.  
Because we turned our backs on all the ways  
That human people show each other  
Their humanity  
Our leaders conjure nightmares  
Then inflict them  
Health and reality and knowledge

They are worthless things.  
And so we must admit that we are worthless.  
We have failed because we are not money.  
Art lent us ways to be irreplaceable.  
Without it we become component parts.

Now our first morning  
Will be in a country where history is twisted  
Like a rope to choke us.  
We have already punished our poor  
Our weak, our young, our old  
For improper existence.  
We have already begun  
The sifting of fatal difference  
And the mass casualties.  
We prefer not to swallow poison  
But we have already swallowed so much.  
Our voices are tiny  
And wiped away by the storm  
The perpetual and useful storm.  
No one speaks for us.  
No one comforts us.  
The idea of kindness makes us weep.  
Our tormentors have made us turn our backs again  
This time on the world  
They require our undivided minds  
With no excursions or comparisons.  
We are alone with them  
And they have taken all our beauties for themselves  
And they love to own them and hate them  
For everything they can show.  
This is where we live.  
In this place unprotected by art.

But we are like you.  
We are little human people  
Smaller than accidents and illnesses and death  
Smaller than governments and hatreds.  
We like breathing but this is not guaranteed  
We're too frightened for laughter  
The sunsets and the dawns are sleepless  
We are not comforted  
Beauty is a luxury that we cannot afford  
We are also and therefore  
Not necessarily entitled to shelter, water, food.

And what can tell us we are human  
Like the other, further humans  
And should have dignity and liberty and life?  
We forget.

We are like you.  
But we allowed ourselves to lose our art  
And when we then lost our hope  
We became dangerous people.  
But we are still like you  
Although now we must say we are not.  
Our artists are artists of Europe and the world  
Our people are people of Europe and the world  
But we sit in a sty now  
And tell each other this is paradise.  
This is perhaps our last creative act.

We are like you  
And we are a lesson  
To prevent you from being like us.  
Among all the other lessons.

But one morning in my country we will leave our homes  
And on that morning we will run in the safe air.  
That first day, those first days  
We will rush to be ourselves again.  
I think we will rush.  
I think we will turn on the light.

Until then  
Please keep your light on for us.  
You still remember us in better times.

Poem: A.L. Kennedy